

Wildlife- Frequently Asked Questions

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Boulder Urban Wildlife

Management Plan (UWMP)

Frequently Asked Questions

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General Plan Questions

What is the purpose and intent of the UWMP?

The purpose of Urban Wildlife Management Plan (UWMP) is to establish a set of policies and guidelines for managing wildlife within the city of Boulder. The intent of the wildlife plan is to fill the gap in wildlife management in the Boulder Valley by integrating urban wildlife management with existing and emerging plans and policies of the Open Space and Mountain Parks Department (OSMP). The plan will establish a framework for making urban wildlife management decisions, provide direction on regulatory and program changes and outline a set of actions for long-term management of wildlife conflicts.

The purpose of the prairie dog management component of the UWMP is to identify prairie dog protection opportunities in the urban service area and outline strategies for resolving short and long-term conflicts involving prairie dogs in the urban service area. There are five primary questions that the plan seeks to address:

- Where in the city should prairie dogs be protected?
- Where should they be removed?
- How can we protect them (in place) and minimize conflicts?
- How should we remove them if necessary?
- How do we balance costs and humane treatment?

What is the "urban area?"

The "urban area" is the land area within the Boulder city limits as well as the area which intended for urban uses as described as Area I and Area II in the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan. Boulder has set growth boundaries and has established the areas intended for urban land use and the areas set aside for rural preservation. Most of the area in the Boulder Valley intended for urban use is already annexed to the city. Map showing the urban service area.

What is the study area for the UWMP?

The study area for the UWMP includes the urban service area (Areas I and II) as well as some sites outside those areas where planned or existing human uses may conflict with the presence of prairie dogs (e.g. the regional park site in the Planning Reserve, the dams at the Boulder Reservoir, Valmont Butte and the 75th Street Wastewater Treatment Plant)

What are the boundaries or geographic scope of the plan? Does the plan include Open Space and Mountain Parks?

The geographic scope of the plan is the developed area of the city that receives urban services, such as water and sewer. Open Space and Mountain Parks policies will guide the management of wildlife habitat on OSMP lands. However, in areas where the developed areas adjoin open space, the plan will propose management strategies to address the values and conflicts of that interface area (428.69 KB).

Will the plan affect private land?

Yes, to a degree. The plan will identify opportunities for conservation and areas of conflict. Some of these may be on private land. The plan will also include management recommendations, which are intended to be useful for private landowners to conserve habitat and effectively resolve conflicts with wildlife.

What does "ecologically-based management" mean in an urban setting?

Ecologically-based management means that the plan will look at the availability of food, space, water, the effects of a species and the presence (or absence) of predators and disease to determine which species would likely exist without significant human effort or result in significant conflict.

Many species of wildlife are adaptable and can live, or make part of their living, in urban areas. These include the songbirds, butterflies and deer that are routinely seen in many Boulder neighborhoods. For some species, urban settings, including backyards, gardens, brush piles, creeks, cemeteries and parks, can provide food, water, places to raise their young and shelter from the elements.

What is an "ecosystem?"

An ecosystem is the combination of air, land and water with the plants and animals that live together in a particular place. In an ecosystem energy flows from the sun through plants and animals. Nutrients like nitrogen and carbon are cycled in an ecosystem by a diverse array of living things.

Will the plan focus on native species? How will the plan address non-native, exotic or invasive species?

The plan will focus on the conservation of native species, since most of the wildlife species in the area are native. However, invasive and/or non-native species may also be addressed as they can reduce the value of habitat or compete directly with native species. Non-native species that create conflict with human uses or the conservation wildlife habitat will be managed using an approach that integrates a variety of control techniques. In response to state law requiring the control of certain “noxious weeds,” the city has used the integrated pest management (IPM) approach successfully for years both in the urban areas and on natural lands.

What is the city doing to manage black bear and mountain lion issues? How do we avoid conflicts in residential areas?

An interagency working group was formed in 2003 to enhance public education and investigate management options to reduce potential conflicts with bears in residential areas, with particular focus on the neighborhoods west of Broadway. The Colorado Division of Wildlife and city staff has engaged in extensive community outreach and education efforts concerning bears for a number of years. Based on the experiences of 2003, including the necessary destruction of a bear by the Division of Wildlife, those efforts were assessed and refined during 2004. A city staff team has been working to enhance educational efforts and evaluate management alternatives and the bear management practices of other jurisdictions.

The Interagency Bear Team has developed and distributed brochures that outline steps that residents can take to avoid conflicts. The team, with support from trained volunteers, has provided education to residents on bears and mountain lions through neighborhood meetings, meetings with the business community, Farmer’s Market displays, hikes and talks by city staff and volunteers. The interagency team will continue to collaborate on all aspects of bear management, including continued educational efforts to the residents of Boulder. Additionally, other program changes and regulatory options are being evaluated in the context of what the city may need to consider imposing within specific geographic areas of the city and/or during specific time periods of the year. This effort will also be coordinated and refined in the context of the development of the Urban Wildlife Management Plan when appropriate.

Will the city implement new regulations to minimize conflicts with wildlife?

New regulations and/or changes to existing regulations and policies may be considered after public process and evaluation of staff recommendations.

Who do I call for information about wildlife issues/conflicts?

In an emergency, call 911 and the dispatcher will help you assess the situation and determine who should respond. Animal Control (303-442-4030) can provide assistance and education for nuisance animals. For educational programs, you can call the Open Space/Mountain Parks Department at 303-441-3440 or the Colorado Division of Wildlife at 303-297-1192.

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Prairie Dog Questions

How many acres of prairie dogs does the plan affect?

According to city-sponsored mapping in 2005, prairie dogs occupy 611 acres of private and public land in the study area.

Does the plan include Open Space and Mountain Parks lands (OSMP)?

The Urban Wildlife Management Plan includes recommendations for OSMP lands within the urban service area and in situations where prairie dog colonies in the urban area are adjacent to OSMP lands. The recommendations of the plan are consistent with existing OSMP plans and policies.

How many prairie dogs is the city proposing to remove?

The city does not have estimates of the number of prairie dogs that are proposed for removal. The plan recommends near-term removal of prairie dogs from 59 of the 611 acres in the study area.

Does "removal" mean they will be killed?

Not necessarily. The city's policy is to explore non-lethal alternatives before resorting to lethal control. That policy applies to both city-owned and private land within the city.

How many prairie dogs is the city proposing to kill? Where?

The only proposed use of lethal control by the city at this time is on two park sites (Tom Watson and Valmont Park sites), or approximately 25 acres of land, where prairie dogs have encroached on developed recreational playing fields. The estimated number of prairie dogs that would be killed by trapping and use of carbon dioxide (not by poisons) at these locations is 200-300. The prairie dogs that are removed will still play an ecological role. They will be transported to the black-footed ferret recovery facility, north of Fort Collins, where they will be used to restore one of the country's most endangered mammals.

Is Boulder ignoring its own wildlife protection policies and ordinances? Isn't killing prairie dogs supposed to be a last resort?

In 2005, the city adopted a wildlife protection ordinance that requires private landowners to follow a "six-step" decision-making process before the city will issue a lethal control permit. The six steps are, (1) Minimize conflicts through non-removal methods; (2) Remove prairie dogs on only a portion of a site; (3) Evaluate the potential for relocation; (4) Evaluate the potential for donation to animal recovery programs (which can mean trapping and lethal control or live transfer); (5) Evaluate the use of trapping and lethal control through carbon dioxide chambers; and (6) If the above steps are not feasible, apply poisons (fumitoxins) to the burrows.

The city holds itself to the standards of the ordinance and will continue to look for non-lethal alternatives for managing prairie dogs. The use of lethal control on prairie dogs in Tom Watson Park and Valmont Park is proposed as a last resort only because other mitigation methods have been utilized over the years with limited success and the city currently does not have a relocation site for these animals.

How does the city protect prairie dogs and their habitat?

The city of Boulder has been a national leader in protecting open space and natural habitat through its progressive planning actions and open space acquisitions over the past 100 years. The city owns and manages over 40,000 acres of land outside the city dedicated to open space and "greenbelt" protection. Approximately 5,000 of those acres are specifically set aside as prairie dog habitat conservation areas (HCAs).

Aren't prairie dogs and other wildlife supposed to be managed by the state?

Prairie dogs, like all wildlife, are the property of the state of Colorado. The state Division of Wildlife controls many aspects of prairie dog management such as relocation, rehabilitation and hunting. The management of prairie dog habitat, however, is the responsibility of landowners where prairie dogs live. Boulder has chosen to develop regulations and policies to guide the management of prairie dogs in the city and on city owned lands.

Why can't prairie dogs and ball fields co-exist?

There are public safety issues with prairie dog burrows on recreational fields. The city is concerned over the potential for injuries to players (children and adults) running and stepping into the open burrows.

Why is the city making such a quick decision?

This is not a quick decision by the city. The city has been attempting to manage the encroachment into the park sites since the late 1990's through many relocation efforts and multiple exclusion efforts with metal, wooden and vinyl barriers and sonic repellants.

Why can't they be relocated to another site in the county like Open Space and Mountain Park lands?

The city is always on the lookout for relocation sites within the county. However, there are currently no known sites available to receive relocated prairie dogs. The majority of prairie dog habitat conservation areas are almost completely full. In these colonies there is already little or no room for colony expansion-even in the absence of new prairie dogs being introduced from relocation projects. In other habitat conservation areas, the OSMP department is managing for a wide range of grassland species and processes. In addition to 1,500 acres of prairie dogs within the system of habitat conservation areas, there are an additional 2,500 acres of prairie dogs inhabiting other OSMP lands.

Why can't they just be moved back to where they came from?

In some cases, prairie dogs have moved into unsuitable habitats because there was no room for the home colonies to grow. There is, therefore, no room for them to be put back. Prairie dogs reintroduced to full colonies would almost certainly be killed by the prairie dogs with established territories. Even in situations where colonies are not full, it is likely that prairie dogs would continue dispersal into areas of conflict unless other management practices (e.g. barrier fences) were used. The staff team developing the management recommendations considered the benefit, feasibility and cost of a wide range of management techniques for each of the urban colonies. Sites were identified as "removal" areas only after considering the possibility of managing them on site.

Why can't prairie dogs be relocated elsewhere in Colorado?

In 1999, the state legislature passed legislation (C.R.S. 35-7-203) which prohibits the release of prairie dogs in another county without permission of the county commissioners of both the sending and release sites. Because prairie dogs are considered "pests" by the state, county commissions are generally not receptive to the release of prairie dogs. Consequently, this piece of legislation greatly reduced the possibility of relocating prairie dogs from one county to another.

Why can't the city just buy more land for these prairie dogs?

Because the focus of the OSMP department is upon ecosystem management and broad open space values, the department has not and is not likely to purchase lands solely for prairie dogs. OSMP has not acquired lands specifically for the purpose of prairie dog relocation. If OSMP purchases suitable habitat it often comes fully occupied with prairie dogs. If the department purchases agricultural lands that do not have prairie dogs, managing them for prairie dogs would require that the department establish a prairie dog habitat conservation area prior to relocation.

Why can't the city build more ball fields somewhere else and not kill prairie dogs on the current site?

The city will be building new ball fields at park sites yet to be developed. The city does not own the Tom Watson site and manages it under a Recreation Lease Agreement with IBM. Under the terms of the agreement, the city must maintain the park site and ball fields. This is a public asset valued at over \$6,000,000 and the city does not feel that giving up this asset is in the best interest of the community.

Why won't the city set up a prairie dog preserve at Valmont Park?

The land at Valmont Park was purchased with money from a voter approved tax increase in 1996. This tax increase and ultimate \$17,000,000 land purchase was approved by the citizens of Boulder specifically for the purpose of developing new parks and facilities for "recreation purposes."

What is the status of the black-tailed prairie dog as a species?

In the late 1990's, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reviewed a petition to list the black-tailed prairie dog as a threatened species. Although the service found that the species was warranted for listing, the listing was precluded by other, higher priorities. This means that the black-tailed prairie dog receives no protection under the federal Endangered Species Act. NatureServe provides a range-wide rating for the black-tailed prairie dog indicating that it is somewhere between "vulnerable to extirpation" and "apparently secure". In Colorado, the Colorado Natural Heritage Program lists the black-tailed prairie dog as vulnerable to extirpation in Colorado. The Colorado Division of Wildlife in the Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy identifies black-tailed prairie dog as a species with moderate and stable populations and as a species of most concern.

How often does prairie dog mapping occur?

Two city departments, Parks and Recreation and Open Space/Mountain Parks, conduct annual prairie dog inventories on natural lands they manage. In the urban core, inventories are conducted on city-owned lands as needed.

Will the plan allow lethal control of prairie dogs?

This is one of the key issues that City Council will decide when the plan is approved. The current wildlife ordinance allows lethal control of prairie dogs under specific conditions.

Who has ultimate responsibility for keeping prairie dogs off private land where they are not wanted, especially if they are coming from public land?

Prairie dogs, like all wildlife, are the property of the State of Colorado, and the state government has management responsibility for wildlife in Colorado. In the city of Boulder, individual landowners may choose to allow prairie dogs to inhabit their property or control prairie dogs in accordance with state and local regulations. The city of Boulder's Open Space and Mountain Parks Department has a policy of working with neighbors to take reasonable action to limit the spread of prairie dogs onto adjacent property. However, the city can not take responsibility for the movement of wildlife.

How concerned do I need to be about getting the plague from prairie dogs? How can I protect myself and my family from it?

Plague is transmitted by fleas, not by prairie dogs, so the best strategy is to avoid getting bitten by fleas. Dogs and cats can pick up fleas from prairie dog colonies and get the plague as well as carry the fleas into your neighborhood or home.

Keep pets out of prairie dog colonies. Squirrels are also susceptible to plague, so keep pets away from squirrels as well.

How predictable is plague and should we use it as a management tool?

Plague is an introduced disease, and prairie dogs are very susceptible to it. It is somewhat cyclical, but all the factors that influence the cycles are not clearly understood. Wildlife managers recognize that plague is not a reliable management tool. Plague outbreaks may occur at any time and spread unpredictably.

Why are active prairie dog colonies so important; why do we protect them?

Prairie dogs create local conditions where soils and the diversity of plants and animals are distinct from the surrounding prairie. Some species depend on prairie dogs for food (coyotes, raptors), while others live in prairie dog burrows (burrowing owls, snakes, rabbits and insects).

Like ponds, creeks, marshes and other features of healthy grasslands, they support diversity. The ecological health and diversity of grasslands depends upon a patchwork of prairie dog colonies, grasslands, wetlands, riparian (creekside) areas and other features creating many habitats. Therefore, a grassland made up only of prairie dog colonies may not help stimulate the growth of grasses and the diversity of other plants, such as wildflowers. Prairie dogs also create disturbance, which can lead to proliferation of weeds in areas where there are non-native grasses.

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Costs

How much money has the city spent on managing prairie dogs?

The city has not tracked all the costs for managing prairie dogs consistently across departments and did not have a reliable, consistent method in place. In a memo to City Council on July 5, 2005 (5.13 MB), we estimated the costs from January 2000 to June 2005 to be \$733,800 for relocation, barriers, consultants and staff time. It was the best estimate given the information we had at the time. It was a rough estimate for several reasons. All staff time for prairie dog related activities was not tracked, some costs were identified separately and some were not, and some costs could be considered prairie dog related or general land management.

Beginning in 2006, staff from all city departments will track time spent on prairie dog and other wildlife management, policy development and permitting. Staff will also track direct costs associated with prairie dog management, such as fencing and other mitigation efforts, relocation and inventory work.

Will the plan include a spending cap?

This question has been posed during the public process and will be discussed with Advisory Boards and City Council.

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Contact Information

For more information, contact Bev Johnson in the Planning Department at <http://joomla.ci.boulder.co.us/johnsonb@bouldercolorado.gov> or 303-441-3272.

If you have development plans for your property that may be in conflict with prairie dogs on the site or if you have any questions about prairie dogs lethal control permits, go to the Wildlife Ordinance site. If prairie dogs are causing nuisance problems for you or the uses on your property, do not attempt to poison or kill the animals. Please call Animal Control at 303-441-3380 for assistance.

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